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WEITERE INFORMATIONEN OK

Monday, March 07, 2016

The trouble with books

The Chinese invented printing, but their writing system required a large number of typefaces, which made for very high up-front capital costs to print even a single short book. Centuries after the slow dawn of Chinese printing Gutenberg in Germany, taking advantage of a concise phonetic alphabet, requiring only a small number of typefaces, invented a printing method that required much less up-front capital than Chinese printers. The Internet has even more radically lowered up-front capital costs to publish than did the Gutenberg revolution.

Chinese printed works were vast but rare. European books were smaller but still too long. Internet works are the actual length a reader needs, they are (or soon will be) available practically everywhere, and often readers can interact frequently with the author.

Most readers don't want to spend most of their time reading verbose works by single author, when a greater variety of more relevant and thoughtfully concise works are available from a much larger pool of thinkers. Prior to the Internet they had much less choice: books were just the way educated people learned and taught. (And many people still believe that reading and writing books is the *sine quo non* of being educated, just as many Europeans in 1500 still lauded the superiority of scribal methods and scholastic thought).

Magazines and newspapers involve smaller form factors, but they still draw from a very small pool of authors. These authors can only write in detail about a wider variety of subjects by pretending to know things that they don't: they take human institutions far more complicated than a single human can possibly comprehend and boil them down to a series of hypersimplified theories, what in less authoritative contexts we'd call ideologies or conspiracy theories.

Instead of being forced to read a vast number of words each from a small number and variety of authors, already widely read by many other people (making your reading of them often quite intellectually redundant), on the Internet you can read much less per-author text (and thus, potentially at least, far more thought out per word) from a much greater number and variety of authors.

The Internet also can be more interactive with more select groups than the old face-to-face + snail-mail + books regime— providing much more opportunity for Socratic dialog, glossing, and other intellectual processes that were too often neglected after Gutenberg. And while the Internet can produce far higher amounts of garbage, mixing up thoughtlessly popular haystacks with thoughtfully rare needles, search engines and links often make wading through these vasty spaces much easier. The Internet allows you to meet people who share your specialized interests and dialog with them, making possible specific interactions that rarely happened in the old regime. However, without actually reading the content, i.e. while initially searching for it, it is hard to distinguish thoughtless (even though textual) content from the thoughtful content -- a big reason why at least for the moment book-literacy retains its aura of

About Me

Nick Szabo

"A premier thinker about history, law and economics, and the lessons they have for security." -- Adam Shostack, Emergent Chaos

"Szabo comes out with these essays that leave me in awe." -- Brian Dunbar

"Reading material that is eclectic, challenging and endlessly fascinating." -- Sean McGrath, Propylon

"Like most blogs worth my attention, this blog is updated only infrequently. That is because the authors of blogs worth my attention only post when they have something to say that is true, relevant and not already known by their audience. Most of the human race does not have the skill to know when an idea has these three properties. The skill is particularly rare in the fields of politics and economics, which is why this blog is such a rare and valuable thing." -- Richard Hollerith

View my complete profile

intellectual superiority over Internet literacy: scholarly publishers with their monetary incentives often take the time to select the most thoughtful works for our consideration. Nevertheless, they lack the knowledge needed to select the most relevant works to match the wide variety of interests and knowledge of their readers, or to judge well among works outside their specialties.

Much as more efficient and speedier transportation networks enabled labor and natural resources to be brought together in a much greater variety of ways, so does the Internet by providing more direct and speedy connections between minds enable a far greater division of knowledge than was possible with in the face-to-face+snail-mail+books regime. However, in contrast to the economy of things, that division of knowledge is largely (so far, at least, and still mostly for the foreseeable future) unmonetized: the information economy is a vastly different beast than the economy of things.

That said, there is a good book(!) that covers much of this (along with of course a bunch of introductory material redundant for most readers, as well as the typical trivial or thoughtless text added to pad it out to books size): Smarter Than You Think by Clive Thompson.

tl;dr if you thought this blog post was too long, why would you ever pick up a book?

Posted by Nick Szabo at 10:56 PM

14 comments:

Tony Sakich said...

I absolutely loved this, distribution of information is still in the transit space and most think it's all digital (it isn't). I have nothing enlightening to really add, just a pat on the back and appreciation for conveying such a message in so few words!

11:24 PM

Saurabh Hooda said...

Book readers and internet readers are not the overlapping sets. There might be some overlaps but both these groups can be quite different as well. Also, stats says that books circulation/sales (print +ebooks) has increased since the beginning of the internet. Yeah, internet might have decreased the attention span of people but books still fare well in grabbing the attention.

World of books does need to be disrupted wrt reusability of books. Most of the print books are not read more than once which is not the optimal use. We, at Lenro (https://lenro.co), are connecting neighborhood book readers so that they can borrow/lend/discuss books in their immediate neighborhood. And yes, we are bullish on Books :)

11:46 PM

isoroku said...

Tweets are the actual length a reader needs.

10:49 AM

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bogdan said...

Why pick up a book? One thing you do with it: read it.
Why go on the Internet? Countless reasons, nobody does it for the sole purpose of reading.
As it looks like your problem is with diluted writing, you've been reading the wrong books.

11:09 AM

Abiatha Swelter said...

"if you thought this blog post was too long, why would you ever pick up a book?"

Because it was written by someone who was a more interesting and better writer than you are, obviously.

11:57 AM

Robert Cottrell said...

To identify curation and discovery as the central problem of digital reading excites me, since I feel like I am part of the solution; I edit The Browser (the browser.com) and I have been recommending five or six articles each day since 2008. But Nick, one point of concrete interest. We recently launched and tested a platform for single-article sales, with 15,000 beta users, and by far the strongest predictor of an article's sales was the author; not the topic, not the publication, nor the price. Which kind of argues, contra your expectation, that if readers have better discovery tools, they will use them to track given authors, ahead of seeking out new ones.

2:04 AM

Anonymous said...

Good advice - for those with ADHD.

3:33 AM

Spandrell said...

Books make you money, blog posts don't. Unless a way is found for authors to make money on the Internet, the old model of book writing and publisher promotion won't die. See how even ebooks haven't replaced physical books.

7:14 AM

Anonymous said...

In general people have been doing most of what they do via the Internet for a good part of human history it is just that using the Internet is often a bit quicker and easier. Historical awareness is often missing in these discussions. Once printing got underway one of the most popular uses were the production of innumerable polemical pamphlets which played the role canvassed here as novel for the Internet today. Also, among the class of people who read and discuss matters letter writing was prolific on a scale we would find almost superhuman nowadays.

We kid ourselves if we think that there is really very much that is new here except the geographical reach that it now possible.

7:06 AM

Tim said...

Another excellent essay, Nick. But why not compress the content out of it and turn it into a short, snarky bit of Twitter repartee?

We all have our "sweet spot" in the length of things we get the most out of reading. And writing, I suppose.

Me, I've almost always gotten the most out of papers and articles it took me at least a couple of hours to read. (And often _much_ longer to think about, re-read, ponder, tell others about, and go back to years later). Some examples may help explain my point. Taken from the crypto world we both were in.

For example, David Chaum's 1985 paper in Communications of the ACM on "Transaction Systems to Make Big Brother Obsolete." (This had a few variant names, as the focus shifted to digital money, anonymity systems, etc.) This was a big, meaty, and seminal paper. I had seen it briefly when it first came out--had a subscription to CACM then--and remembered it when I was advising an "information exchange" start-up back in the pre-Ebay, pre-WWW days. Details can be found by spelunking the early years of the Cypherpunks list.

Absorbing this paper, an ongoing process, took hours of reading, making notes, making diagrams, reading other papers, and, yes, even consulting books (the half-dozen or so on cryptology then available). A few dozen other such papers each justified many hours of study. The DC-Net paper, the Nakamoto paper, and so many others.

Certainly no short tweet or chatroom repartee could do justice to this. I could name a dozen other such papers that have influenced me mightily. And the years and years of interaction in various fora to help shape ideas and thoughts. The work that led to Bitcoin (various ideas 1992-98, and then the resurgence in this area by you, Wei Dai, Hal Finney, Adam Back, Zooko, and others) took a lot of deep thinking. Nakamoto was obviously strongly-influenced by the lengthy debates and pondered deeply on using "rational self-interest" and Nash equilibrium incentives to make progress on at least the "weak" form of distributed agreement. (Called by many names.)

This stuff didn't fit into 140 characters of snark and drive-by comments in an echo chamber. I don't have the Twatter, nor the FacePlant, nor do I hang out on Reddit nor in one-line IRC-like chatrooms. Sadly, I've seen a lot of meaty discussion forums give way to people just blogging (often a one-to-a-few-dozen form of publishing) and then to the bloggers moving to Twitter feeds. Kind of like the way society is encouraging citizen-units to take pride in calling themselves ADHD.

I do agree that most books are too long. Original work is often puffed-out padding chapters and musings to justify a full 200-page thing. Fortunately, libraries are good for just reading the relevant chapters. (And online libraries of various sorts....)

By the way, this emphasis on papers is of course how most researchers and academics--and industrial engineers!--focus on things. Has been for centuries. The references and citations are mostly to papers, not to books. I cherish the wide availability of so many PDFs these days. I just fill my iPads and Macs with thousands of papers and even a lot of books.

So, I guess I'll conclude that a 4-20 page PDF is just about the "sweet spot" for me. Even if I end up skimming-it. I'd like to see the emergence of something a little bit less formal than the Cornell ArXive site, but with places for "civilians" to publish PFF-like articles. Neither blogs nor the Wkipedia nor the ArXive site are well-suited for this right now.

--Tim

4:49 PM

Peter York said...

Hoo doggies. Okay. As if reading was nothing but a source of information, as non-readers think it is. Silent reading - just for fun - is a developmental process that orders the mind and makes it work logically.

The problem with the electronic lit is its brevity; it is part of the vast miasma of flickering pictures we (esp. children) live in. Reading a book helps develop the ability to concentrate longer. The lack of this is tragically apparent when supposedly normal people believe in a war on women, that conservatives want to hurt minorities, that any disagreement is hate speech, and have allowed campii to become Fellini-esque.

Minds raised on flickering pictures lack stick. They're shallow and weak.

Do not take the electric devices as being unquestionable boons; they're the opposite. Now they have video players in cars. "Shut that kid up! I'm trying to drive! Put in another video!"

7:46 PM

Erik Aronesty said...

Yes, too long. Nice book reco though. I never pick up books, but it's avail on Kindle.

10:56 AM

Matthew C. said...

Full agreement. This is why I no longer read non-fiction books. Usually the important ideas in them are available on the Internet months earlier in 5000 words or less.

12:57 PM

Matthew said...

Great expansion of my own thoughts on why I stopped reading non-fiction books a decade or so ago.

Thanks!

4:56 PM

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